# My Dinner with Hayden: A Heated Rivalry Short Story

OCTOBER 2, 2019 · HEATED RIVALRY (/NEWS/TAG/HEATED+RIVALRY), WRITING (/NEWS/TAG/WRITING), GAME CHANGERS (/NEWS/TAG/GAME+CHANGERS), BONUS CONTENT (/NEWS/TAG/BONUS+CONTENT)

It took me several tries to land on an epilogue for *Heated Rivalry* that I was happy with. I tried a few different scenes, including one that, despite ultimately rejecting it, I kind of liked. It was a scene where Ilya and Shane are hosting Hayden and his wife, Jackie, for an awkward dinner party shortly after Hayden learns that his best friend is secretly dating Ilya Rozanov.

I've decided to take what I had written of that scene and expand it into a short story. This story takes place slightly before the actual epilogue in *Heated Rivalry*. So it's an...epilogue prologue? It takes place almost sixteen months after the last chapter of *Heated Rivalry*, and about three weeks before the epilogue.

Thanks again for all the love Ilya and Shane have gotten! I really love writing these characters. I am about to start writing books four and five in the *Game Changers* series, and while neither of those will be a direct sequel to *Heated Rivalry*, Ilya and Shane's story will continue one way or another.

I want to give a huge thanks to my amazing editor, Mackenzie Walton, for giving this a quick read and making suggesting some very helpful edits.

The audiobook for *Game Changer* will be released on October 8, and *Heated Rivalry* will be available in audio format on October 22.

Okay, here is what happens when Ilya and Shane try to host a dinner party. Enjoy!

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Ilya opened the door of Shane's house to greet Hayden and his wife (Jessica?). He *could* have waited for Shane to finish washing his hands in the kitchen so he could join him at the door, but this was more fun.

"Oh god," Hayden said, as soon as he was faced with Ilya, "I don't think I can do this."

Ilya smiled, and stepped aside. "Please come in."

Hayden moved past him, his wife following closely behind. She, at least, offered Ilya a friendly, and possibly apologetic, smile as she handed him the bottle of wine they had brought.

"Shane!" Hayden called out. "Don't want to alarm you, but Ilya Rozanov is in your house."

Shane emerged from the kitchen, drying his hands with a dishtowel. He was wearing dark pants and a blue button-up shirt that was open at the collar. Ilya was struck, not for the first time that night, by how good he looked, and by how right this all felt. Shane and Ilya, at home, having dinner with friends.

Even if the friends sucked a little.

“You promised you weren’t going to be an asshole, Hayd,” Shane complained.

“That’s true,” Hayden’s wife confirmed. “You did promise that.” She offered Ilya her hand. “I’m Jackie, by the way.”

“Jackie,” Ilya repeated. “Is nice to meet you. Your husband I am not sure about yet.”

“He’ll behave.” Jackie was a beautiful woman with long, dark hair, sparkling green eyes, and an athletic body. She was much too good for Hayden.

Shane directed them all to the spacious living room. Ilya went to the kitchen to deposit the gifted wine and to get the (better) wine he had already opened. He definitely needed wine. When he entered the living room, things were already looking dire; Jackie was making small talk with Shane about his electric fireplace while Hayden was looking at the floor with his hands clasped between his knees.

Ilya set four wineglasses on the coffee table, then immediately plucked one and filled it generously. He handed it wordlessly to Hayden, because he looked like he could use it. Hayden accepted it with a wary nod and, because he had no class at all, took a giant gulp. After he’d swallowed, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, made a move to place the glass on the table, then seemed to think better of it and brought it back to his lips for another mouthful.

“I was just telling Shane how beautiful this house is,” Jackie said.

Ilya handed her the next glass of wine, which she thanked him for before taking a small, sensible sip. “Yes,” Ilya agreed. “We should give you a tour. The master bathroom has a very good shower.” He looked directly at Hayden and winked. “Big enough for two.”

Hayden’s jaw clenched as he reached for the wineglass he’d only just set down.

“How are the kids?” Shane asked quickly. “How’s Amber?”

“Great!” Jackie said brightly. “She’s into everything of course, now that she’s walking.”

Ilya considered his options for where to sit. Shane and Jackie were occupying the two armchairs closest to the fireplace. Hayden was sitting at one end of the sofa that faced them. Ilya could sit at the other end of the sofa, but he chose the more obnoxious option of perching on the arm of Shane’s chair. Instead of handing Shane his wine, Ilya draped his

arm around Shane's shoulders and hovered the glass in front of his lips. Shane tilted his head back to give him a look that was more annoyed than charmed, then took the wineglass.

"I would love to meet your kids," Ilya said. "Shane has told me lots of stories about them." It wasn't really true. Not the stories part, anyway. Ilya did legitimately like kids, though, and the Pikes had more than enough of them. He smiled warmly at Jackie, who beamed back at him.

"That's sweet," she said. "Maybe next time you're in town we can have you guys over in the afternoon. The kids love their Uncle Shane."

Ilya nudged his boyfriend. "*Uncle Shane*."

"I haven't been a good uncle lately," Shane said. "I've been so busy."

"My fault," Ilya confessed.

"Jesus," Hayden muttered.

Jackie shot her husband a pointed look, and Shane stood. "Maybe we should eat."

Hayden stood just as quickly. "Yup. Definitely. Let's eat."

As Ilya made his way to the dining room, Shane tugged on his arm to hold him back. "Stop doing that," he hissed.

"Doing what?" Ilya asked innocently.

"You're intentionally bothering Hayden."

"Am not. I have not even asked his wife what she sees in him! I am being very good."

Shane's face got stern and adorable. "Behave," he warned.

In response, Ilya kissed his forehead. "Always, moy lyubovnik."

He took a moment to enjoy the flush that always appeared in Shane's cheeks when Ilya used Russian terms of endearment. He would definitely need to keep Shane's wineglass full tonight. He wanted him to loosen up and enjoy himself, and then get all snuggly in bed later.

Shane invited Hayden and Jackie to sit at the dining room table before rushing off into the kitchen. Ilya topped off their guests' wineglasses before saying, "Sorry to leave you alone, but I should help him."

"Of course," Jackie said. Hayden nodded through a mouthful of wine.

Ilya went to the kitchen, but paused a moment to lean against the entryway and watch as Shane dipped a spoon into the large pot on the stove and brought it to his lips to sample. He blew gently a couple of times before sinking the spoon into his mouth. His brow furrowed in concentration as he worked to determine if it was good enough to serve his best friends. It was cute, and Ilya loved him.

"How is it?" Ilya asked, moving away from the entrance to stand unnecessarily close to Shane in the spacious kitchen.

"I think it's good," Shane said, though he didn't sound sure. "Do you think it's too salty?"

Ilya kissed him, tasting only the barest remnants of the coq au vin on his tongue. "Tastes perfect," he said when he pulled away.

"Don't be stupid," Shane said, but his voice was unsteady. He cleared his throat and said, "Taste it properly."

Ilya rolled his eyes and grabbed a fresh spoon. He dipped it into the pot, then made a show of dragging the sample into his mouth with his tongue. He slipped the spoon between his lips and hollowed his cheeks, moaning wantonly as he sucked and savored the rich flavor of the broth. The stew was fine. The plain arousal on Shane's face was delicious.

"Is good," Ilya said after he pulled the spoon from his mouth with a wet pop. "Where is the parsley I chopped?"

Cooking was something that he and Shane had gotten into together. It was enjoyable, finding recipes and learning new kitchen techniques. Working together on something, rather than competing (not that it was *never* competitive). Plus, there was delicious food to eat when they were done. And Ilya was pretty sure that the feeling of accomplishment made Shane horny. Win-win-win.

They ladled the stew into white bowls, Ilya wiping any stray drops from the rims with a towel. He artfully sprinkled the parsley on top of each one, then grabbed two of the bowls. He paused for a quick kiss before carrying the food out to their waiting guests.

“Wow!” Jackie enthused when Ilya placed one of the bowls in front of her. “You guys made this?”

“We did,” Ilya said. Looking at the food now, he felt a little bit proud. Shane brought the remaining two out, then darted back to the kitchen to grab a basket full of bread he had purchased at a bakery that morning.

“What is this?” Hayden poked at the stew with his spoon like he suspected Ilya may have dropped some razor blades in it.

“Coq au vin,” Shane said proudly (and perfectly) as he returned with the bread.

“That’s French,” Ilya added helpfully. Hayden glared at him.

They all ate without speaking for a few spoonfuls. Ilya wondered who would crack first. Not surprisingly, it was Shane.

“Did you hear about that McFarland suspension?”

Hayden’s eyes shot up, and Ilya could see the relief in them. “Yeah! Holy shit, right?”

They gossiped with each other about the latest off-ice conduct suspension, and Ilya took the opportunity to offer Jackie a sympathetic smile. She smiled back, and rolled her eyes. When Shane brought up the proposed new rules regarding defensive line changes, Ilya decided to step up and be the hero.

“Let’s not talk about hockey tonight,” he suggested mildly.

“*Thank you*,” Jackie said.

Unfortunately, no one seemed to have an alternate topic to discuss, so the four of them fell back into awkward silence.

“Well, we need to talk about *something*,” Shane complained after a minute had passed.

“We could talk about how Hayden is eating around the mushrooms like a five-year-old,” Ilya offered.

Hayden put his spoon down with a loud clank. “We could talk about what the fuck Shane sees in you.”

“*Hayden*,” Jackie scolded.

“Ah.” Ilya nodded sagely. “You are jealous.”

“What? No!” Hayden sputtered. “I’m not *jealous* of you. I’m not—Shane, I love you. You know that. But I’m not—” He turned to Ilya, who was now thoroughly enjoying himself. “Jesus, my wife is *right here*, you fucking asshole. And you know that’s not what I meant.”

Ilya just shrugged. He hadn’t actually meant it, but now he was starting to wonder.

“The food is delicious,” Jackie said, probably wanting to steer the conversation away from whether or not her husband had a giant crush on Shane. “I didn’t even know you cooked, Shane.”

“He’s full of surprises,” Hayden grumbled.

Ilya could see the tension in Shane’s jaw and in his eyes.

“I got into cooking this past year,” Shane said. He took a sip of water, and Ilya noticed a slight tremor in his fingers as he set the glass back down. “It’s something we’ve been doing together, when we get the chance.”

“That’s sweet,” she said, and sounded like she meant it. “We should cook together some time, Hayden.”

“I suck at cooking.”

“You suck at hockey,” Ilya pointed out. “But you still play it.”

Hayden looked pleadingly at Shane. “Seriously? *This* guy? I’ve got no problem with you being gay—”

“What a hero,” Ilya said flatly.

Hayden turned to Ilya. “Shane can date all the men he wants! But *you* are a relentless douchebag and I’ve never liked you.”

“Jesus, Hayden,” Jackie mumbled.

Ilya raised an eyebrow. “You should save some of that for our wedding.”

“Fuck, don’t even—” Hayden shook his head, then went back to pushing mushrooms around his bowl.

There was a tense minute where no one said anything, and then Jackie asked, with a noticeable amount of forced cheerfulness, “So, Ilya. Did you get back to Russia over the summer at all?”

Jesus, this was a nightmare. “No,” Ilya said. He couldn’t think of anything to add, so he didn’t.

“He was at my cottage, mostly,” Shane explained. “And then dealing with moving to Ottawa.”

“Right,” Jackie said. “How are you liking Ottawa?”

“Fine,” Ilya said. “Team sucks, but the city is not bad.”

“I don’t understand why you’d leave a contender like Boston to play for Ottawa,” Hayden said.

“I am sure you don’t understand a lot of things.”

“Ilya,” Shane said wearily.

“What happens when you guys break up, Rozanov?” Hayden continued, jabbing a fork between Shane and Ilya. “You gonna sign with Anaheim or something?”

Shane must have sensed Ilya was about to say something that almost certainly would have made Hayden smash the wine bottle on the table and come for Ilya’s face with it, because he put a hand on Ilya’s forearm and said, “Could you guys give it a rest? Please?”

“Yes, Hayden. Grow the hell up,” Jackie said. “And besides…” She leaned in, hands cupped around her wineglass and eyes glinting. “I want to hear how you two met.”

Ilya snorted. He couldn’t help it.

“I mean,” Jackie said with a dismissive wave of her hand, “not how you *met*. We all know that, obviously. But when was the first time you…felt sparks?”

“I’ll bet Shane was drunk as hell,” Hayden grumbled.

“We don’t all need alcohol to make people sleep with us,” Ilya said. Hayden flushed, possibly realizing that Shane had told Ilya all about how he and Jackie had met at a nightclub years ago.

“I wasn’t drunk,” Shane said quietly. “I wasn’t even old enough to drink legally.”

“Wait,” Hayden said. “Back the fuck up. You told me it had been going on for a while. I thought you meant a season or two. Not—how fucking young were you when you first—I mean. When you first…fuck, I can’t. You know what I mean.”

“Nineteen,” Ilya said at the same time Shane said, “Eighteen.”

Ilya shot him a curious look. “We were nineteen the first time we—”

“Oh,” Shane said. “I thought the question was the first time we felt, um, sparks.” His ears were bright red and Ilya wanted to bite them.

“Yes,” Ilya said. His voice has gone soft, but he didn’t care. “Eighteen then. That’s right.”

The look that Shane gave him in response was so heated and adoring that Ilya wondered how rude it would be to shove Hayden and his lovely wife out the door right now.

“So, where were you?” Jackie asked, breaking the moment. “When you were both eighteen?”

“It was, um…” Shane started, but then appeared to be overcome with embarrassment at the memory.

“A hotel gym,” Ilya finished for him. “The night we were both drafted.”

“A *public* gym?” Hayden looked like he was going to faint. “Before you were even rookies? Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Nothing happened!” Shane explained quickly. “It wasn’t like that. I just…felt something.”

“Lust,” Ilya supplied.

“*No*. Maybe. Shut up.” Shane sighed. “Can we stop talking about this?”

“Absolutely,” Hayden said.

The four of them stopped talking altogether. They ate in silence for another several uncomfortable minutes before Hayden rested his spoon beside his bowl of mushrooms and said, “So, you go back to Ottawa tomorrow, Rozanov?”

“Yes. Don’t worry. I will be gone for a while.”

This visit, like he suspected most of them would be during this first season of living a couple of hours apart, was a short one. He’d had a day off, so he’d driven to Montreal immediately following his game in Ottawa last night. He’d arrived after midnight, and despite Shane having to get up early for practice, they’d kept each other awake for hours. Tomorrow afternoon Ilya was flying to Vancouver and wouldn’t be back in Ottawa for two weeks. He had a day off when he got back, but unfortunately Shane would be on the road then.

It wasn’t going to be easy, but it was definitely better than it had been before. Last season had been agony. Ilya had still been playing for Boston, and knowing that Shane was *in love* with him had made keeping their secret so much harder. Before they’d admitted their feelings to one another, Ilya had always enjoyed the sneaking around. He’d liked Shane Hollander being his sexy secret. But the past fifteen months hadn’t been much fun at all.

It was why Ilya had been unenthusiastic when Shane had suggested having Hayden and Jackie over for dinner. Their nights together were so few and far between that Ilya didn’t want to share a single one with anyone else. Especially not Hayden stupid Pike.

Hayden had inadvertently stumbled on the truth a week ago by joking that Shane was secretly dating Ilya. Shane, who Ilya knew had been trying to figure out the right moment to tell his best friend that he was in love with Ilya Rozanov, had seized the opportunity and come clean. Hayden had been, understandably, dumbfounded.

This dinner was important to Shane, and Ilya knew the purpose of this evening was to make Jackie, and especially Hayden, understand what Shane saw in him. As far as Ilya was concerned, it wasn’t anyone’s business why Shane loved him. Ilya certainly didn’t need to convince anyone that he was worth Shane’s affection. Fuck them. It wasn’t his job, or Shane’s, to explain their relationship to anyone.

After dinner they retired to the living room. Other than the occasional comment on a piece of furniture or question about Shane’s parents (both from Jackie), the room was silent. Ilya decided to put on some background music so it didn’t feel like they were in a hospital waiting area. After another fifteen minutes of stiff conversation to a backdrop of Post Malone, he went to the kitchen to get more wine.

He briefly considered the vodka, but decided it would not be the best choice given his early morning the next day. Or the fact that he would prefer a cuddly Shane later to a horribly ill Shane.

When Ilya returned, Shane and Jackie were standing near the hallway that led to the stairs. “I’m going to show Jackie the house,” Shane said. Ilya could very clearly read the unspoken message in Shane’s words, *Stay here and bond with Hayden*.

Fuck. Ilya should have grabbed the vodka.

He refilled Hayden’s wineglass, then his own, and then sat at the opposite end of the couch from Hayden.

“So,” Ilya said.

“What are you doing with him?” Hayden asked abruptly. “What’s your game here?”

“Game?”

Hayden stood up, and loomed over Ilya in what was probably supposed to be a threatening manner. “Is this a joke to you? Or do you just get off on fucking with him?”

“I do get off on fucking him. Yes.”

Hayden’s hands curled into fists. “That’s not what I mean and you know it! Shane is, like, forbidden. Is that the appeal?”

Ilya’s eyebrows shot up. “You do not think much of your best friend.”

“I don’t think much of *you*.”

Ilya sighed and nonchalantly crossed his legs. “And who *should* Shane be with?”

“A nice guy! Someone who…I don’t know!” Hayden threw up his hands. “Someone who fucking *cares* about him?”

All right. That was quite enough. Ilya stood, which gave him a good seven inches of height on Hayden. In the tight space between the sofa and the coffee table, their chests bumped together. “You think you know what is best for him?”

“Yeah. I’ve known him since we were rookies.”

Ilya's lips quirked up. "Maybe you were not listening at dinner, but so have I."

"Well, you wouldn't know it! He never fucking mentioned you."

"Funny. He didn't talk much about you either."

"I'm his best friend."

"I'm his boyfriend."

"You've also slept with like a thousand women!"

Ilya scrunched his nose. "Is probably not a thousand."

He began doing some rough calculations in his head, but was interrupted when Hayden said, "Who do you think you are kidding here? You obviously aren't, y'know, *gay*."

Ilya stared at him blankly. "You have not heard of bisexuals?"

Hayden narrowed his eyes. "Bisexual, huh?"

Ilya switched to an overly animated, educational tone. "Some people like apples. Some people like oranges. *Some* people like apples *and* oran—"

"Oh fuck you. I know what it means."

"Then you know I can sleep with a million women and still fall in love with your best buddy Shane."

Hayden shook his head, looking more frustrated than ever. "Do you have *any* idea of what it will do to him if this secret gets out?"

Ilya snorted. "Yes. I have thought about it a bit."

"I won't let you hurt him."

"Okay."

"I'm serious." And then Hayden shoved Ilya's chest with both hands.

“Are you guys fucking kidding me?” Both men whipped their heads around to see Shane standing in the entranceway. “Like, are you guys serious right now?”

“He started it,” Ilya said. It sounded stupid even to his own ears.

Shane pointed at Ilya. “Do you know how long I have been wanting to do this? To introduce you to my friends as my boyfriend? Hayden and Jackie are my *best friends* and you are being an asshole.”

“Fucking right,” Hayden said smugly.

“And you!” Shane said, turning his fury on Hayden. “You’re acting like I met Ilya yesterday or something. Just because you only found out about us recently doesn’t mean our relationship is new. It’s pretty fucking solid, even if you don’t want to believe it. Even if you don’t want to consider the fact that we have been keeping this thing a secret for almost ten fucking years now!”

“Shane,” Hayden sputtered. “I—”

“Do you know how *scared* I’ve been this whole time? Do you know how fucking terrifying it is to feel attracted to your archrival when you are *eighteen* and your rival also happens to be a *man*?”

Okay, maybe Ilya shouldn’t have refilled Shane’s wineglass as many times as he had.

“I have been so fucking scared and alone for so goddamned long and tonight was supposed to end some of that and you guys are acting like children. Fuck both of you.”

There was a *loud* silence that hung in the room for what felt like an hour, and then Hayden said, very quietly, “You could’ve told me, Shane.”

“What?”

This time, Hayden’s voice was stronger. “You could’ve told me. I hate that you kept it from me all this time. That you thought you needed to.”

Well, that was unexpectedly sweet.

“It hurts, y’know?” Hayden finished.

Shane's mouth was hanging open, and Ilya was torn between speaking on his behalf, and waiting to see what Shane would say. Curiosity won out.

"I couldn't," Shane said finally. "We hadn't even told *each other*. It took us *seven years* to figure out how we felt about each other. For me to figure out that I'm gay. But once we sorted all out, I wanted to tell you. And I did. Eventually."

"And," Ilya added, because he couldn't help himself, "you've taken it super well."

Shane shot him a warning glance. Ilya looked away.

"I thought you hated him," Hayden said. "We talked about how much we hated him all the time. For years! And then I find out not only that you don't hate him, but you… I mean, you must love him so fucking much, right? Like, you'd have to, to go through all of this."

The unwavering way Shane met Hayden's eyes when he replied, simply, "Yes, I do," took Ilya's breath away.

"Wow," Jackie said, reminding Ilya that she was also in the room. That there were other people on earth besides him and Shane right now.

"Yes," Ilya murmured, unable to take his eyes off Shane's raised, determined chin.

"I'm sorry," Hayden sounded like all the fight had left him. "I'm making this about me, and it's not. This dinner was a big deal for you, and I fucked it up."

Shane didn't look like he'd been expecting that because he opened his mouth and closed it a few times before he finally nodded and said, "All right. Thank you."

"And," Hayden turned to Ilya, "if Shane loves you or whatever, then I guess you can't be such a bad guy."

"There are good things about me, I think."

Hayden scrubbed a hand over his face. "How the hell are you going to keep this a secret? Do you even have a plan?"

"Actually," Shane said, "we do. Go sit down and Ilya will get the cookies I bought for dessert." He fixed his gaze on Ilya, and Ilya nodded. "Then we'll tell you about the Irina Foundation."

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Two hours later, Shane was closing the door behind Hayden and Jackie. Ilya placed a gentle hand on Shane's lower back, only to have him turn on his heel and march into the kitchen.

*Uh-oh*.

"Shane?" he called after him, but he knew Shane wouldn't turn back, or even acknowledge him. So he followed after his pissed-off boyfriend, and found him angrily loading the dishwasher.

"You are still mad," Ilya observed.

In response, Shane forcefully shoved the bottom rack of the dishwasher so it hit the back of the machine with a loud clatter of plates and cutlery.

"At me?" Ilya guessed.

"Yes," Shane ground out. "No. I don't know." He folded his arms across his chest and stared out the window. "I hate this."

"The window?"

"No. All of this." He gestured between himself and Ilya.

Ilya's heart dropped to the floor. "You hate…us?"

Shane squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them again, his gaze was more miserable than angry. Ilya preferred angry. "I hate how we have to hide. I hate only getting these stolen moments with you. It's been so many fucking years of this, and I'm tired."

Ilya's heart returned to his chest. He took a step toward Shane, wanting to touch him but not wanting him to stomp away again. "I know."

"It's not fair! Hayden and Jackie get to just, y'know, *exist*. The night they first got together, I watched them make out on a dance floor."

"Pervert," Ilya teased.

“I mean I *saw* them. I wasn’t watchi—shut up. The point is, they’d just met that night, and they were making out in front of the whole world without having to worry for one fucking second about anyone seeing them.”

“Or their weird friend watching them.”

Shane pressed his lips together, and Ilya knew he was trying not to smile. He counted that as a victory.

“They started dating, and then a few months later they were engaged and everyone on the team was congratulating Hayden. They had a big wedding and no one was, like, baffled and horrified that they were together.” He exhaled. “What is that even like?”

“Probably like when you were dating Rose Landry.”

Shane groaned. “Oh my god, Ilya. That was like two years ago. Let it go.”

Ilya loved to tease him about Rose Landry, so, no. He would not be letting it go. Rose had since become one of Shane’s closest friends, and was one of the few people who knew about Shane and Ilya. Ilya liked Rose a lot, actually.

“I wanted to feel *normal* tonight,” Shane sighed.

“You want a normal relationship?” Ilya hoped not because that was something he could definitely never offer Shane, as much as he wished he could.

“It isn’t fair. That’s all. Hayden criticizes the hell out you, and my relationship with you, as if it’s all some ridiculous joke. And you don’t do *anything* to help. I mean, I want people to understand why I love you, but you are so fucking terrible at showing them.”

*Oh.*

“You want me to be different?” Ilya asked.

Shane let his arms fall to his sides. “I want you to not be a dick all the time.”

“I’m sorry,” Ilya said, and he hoped his words sounded as sincere as he meant them.

Shane snorted and turned toward the sink. He banged a couple of pots around, pretending to be busy, until Ilya stilled him by resting a hand on his arm.

“Do you know what I was thinking all night?” Ilya asked gently. “When I was being a dick?”

Shane’s shoulders tightened. “What?”

“I was thinking,” Ilya moved closer, lining his body up with Shane’s. Letting his chest brush against Shane’s back. “About how much I loved this. Being at home with you. Even having friends over. Being a couple.”

Shane’s shoulders relaxed as he exhaled loudly. “I love it too. I just want more of it.” He turned to face Ilya, and his eyes were much too sad.

Ilya placed a hand on the side of Shane’s face, brushing a thumb over his freckles. “Maybe I don’t think about how it is unfair because…” He paused a moment, trying to choose his English words carefully. “I feel lucky. This is more than I have ever had.”

Shane’s face scrunched up in confusion. Definitely one of Ilya’s top three Shane Hollander expressions. “More what?”

Ilya shrugged. “Love. Family. All that stuff.”

Shane’s face descrunched. For a moment, Ilya could swear he saw a tremor in his lip, but then Shane thunked his forehead against Ilya’s chest.

“Why are you like this?” Shane moaned into Ilya’s shirt. “Can’t you let me be annoyed with you? Do you have to ruin it by saying romantic shit like that?”

“Romantic? I thought it was more pathetic.”

Shane shook his head against Ilya’s chest, and Ilya wrapped his arms around him.

“I love you,” Shane murmured.

Ilya kissed the top of his head. It never got old, hearing Shane say that. Nothing had grown stale between them, even though it had been over a year since they had first said those life-changing words to each other. Maybe it was because their time together was always short, and precious. Maybe one day, when they were old and retired and making dinner together for the millionth time, Ilya’s blood wouldn’t heat at the sound of Shane’s voice.

That day was not today, though.

Ilya tangled his fingers into Shane's hair and lightly tugged, pulling his face away from Ilya's chest and tilting it up to meet his gaze.

"Don't you have something to say to me?" Shane asked wryly.

Ilya's lips quirked up, and instead of saying the words back, he leaned down and kissed him, slowly. Adoringly. The kind of unhurried, careful kiss that Ilya knew Shane wouldn't put up with for long. As expected, within a minute Shane let out a growl and took control. He kissed Ilya hungrily, wrapping one ankle around the back of Ilya's leg and pulling their bodies tight together.

This was the man that Ilya loved. Right here. Sexy and challenging and unabashedly on fire for Ilya. Without even looking at what might be in the way, Ilya hoisted Shane up and sat him on the counter. Something clattered into the sink, and something else fell to the floor, but neither man reacted. They kept kissing and yanking each other's shirts out of their pants. Shane shoved Ilya's shirt up, bunching it under his armpits, then slid his palms over Ilya's chest. Over the grizzly bear tattoo that covered most of Ilya's left pec. Ilya could admit to himself now that the tattoo was a bit much, but he'd been eighteen when he'd gotten it, and it gave Shane something to tease him about, so he couldn't hate it.

Ilya broke the kiss and pulled back a bit, smiling as Shane eagerly chased his mouth, leaning too far forward and nearly falling off the countertop. Ilya steadied him with one hand, but Shane wrapped his legs tight around Ilya's waist and yanked him back toward him, gripping the back of Ilya's head and locking their mouths together. Ilya responded by lifting Shane off the counter, placing his hands firmly under his ass. He spun them until Shane's back was pressed against the wall by the door, then kept kissing him.

He kissed his way down Shane's neck as Shane writhed against the wall. "Bedroom," Shane gasped. "I need you in me."

Ilya grinned against his neck. He loved it when Shane asked for what he wanted. "I can fuck you right here, moy vozlyublenniy."

"No. *Fuck*, maybe," Shane panted. "What does that one mean?"

"My horny animal," Ilya lied.

"Eat shit." Shane unwrapped his legs and lowered himself to the floor. "Bedroom. Come on."

He pushed past Ilya, darting toward the stairs. Ilya caught up with him on the landing, halfway up. He grabbed his arm and spun him, pinning him against the wall with hands on both of Shane's biceps. Ilya's lips hovered a breath away from Shane's.

“Whatever happens, I’m…” Ilya huffed in frustration, English escaping him again.

“What?” Shane’s eyes were wide.

Ilya loosened his grip on his arms, sliding his hands down to grasp Shane’s hands instead. “I will tell the whole world right now, if it is what you want.”

Shane’s brow pinched. “You would?”

“Yes.”

Shane squeezed Ilya’s hands. “I’m scared,” he admitted. “I want to just…be with you. But I also don’t want to deal with everything that we would have to deal with. And I don’t want to lose you.”

“You won’t lose me.”

“What if no one will sign us? What if you get *deported*?”

“Then I will fake my own death. We will move to a cabin in the mountains.”

Shane shook his head. “I’m being serious.”

“I am serious. If we hide forever, or tell the world right now, I am with you. I will quit hockey, or fight to stay. Whatever you want.”

“It shouldn’t be only my decision.”

Ilya sighed. “I mean…I am yours, yes? To protect that, I will do anything.”

Shane’s eyes went gooey. “You’re mine. Yes.”

“Then…” Ilya brushed Shane’s bangs aside. “Let me show you.”

When they got to the bedroom, they stayed standing at the foot of the bed, kissing for long minutes. Eventually, Ilya began to slowly undress Shane. He carefully removed each item of clothing, covering the newly exposed skin with soft kisses and gentle bites while Shane shivered. In the morning, Ilya would be gone, and they wouldn’t see each other again for weeks, but he would make damn sure Shane wouldn’t doubt Ilya’s devotion while they were apart. He would spend the rest of this night worshipping him. Ilya could sleep on the fucking plane.

“Yours,” Ilya said again as he sank to his knees. He peppered light kisses around Shane’s bellybutton and over the ridges of his abs. He flicked his gaze up to catch Shane’s and found desire burning bright in his eyes. He was gorgeous, backlit by the soft light of the bedside lamp. Shadows dipped into the hard lines of this chest and stomach, accentuating his muscle definition.

“Yours,” Shane whispered back.

Ilya nodded slowly, and trailed his fingers to the button on Shane’s pants. He flicked it open, then followed the zipper’s descent with kisses down to the base of Shane’s cock. Ilya slid his pants down to the floor, then tapped Shane’s ankle so he would step out of them. Once the pants had been kicked into a corner of the room, Ilya pressed his mouth to the bulge in Shane’s underwear.

Ilya breathed hot on Shane’s cock through the black fabric of his boxer briefs. He traced the outline of Shane’s erection with his tongue, then dipped his head to mouth at his balls.

“Holy fuck that feels good,” Shane gasped. He curled his fingers into Ilya’s hair, gripping but not controlling. Ilya was still in charge. Ilya would convince Shane with his body that everything would be all right. They were good. They would always be good.

When Shane’s underwear was thoroughly damp and clinging to his erection, Ilya peeled them down and off, then reunited them with Shane’s pants in the corner. Shane’s cock bobbed eagerly in front of Ilya’s face, but Ilya ignored it, returning his attention to his balls. He loved Shane’s balls. They were naturally smooth and perfectly shaped. He loved the feel of them in his mouth, the weight of them; heavy with Shane’s need for release.

“God, Ilya. One of these nights you’re gonna make me come just from this, I swear.”

Ilya waggled his eyebrows. “Could be tonight.”

Shane groaned, but he was smiling. “No way. I need you to fuck me tonight. Please.”

“Well…” Ilya ran his tongue up the length of Shane’s cock. “You did say please.”

“And could you take off your clothes? Pretty please?”

Ilya stood, then gave Shane a quick kiss before unbuttoning his own rumpled shirt just enough to pull it over his head. “On the bed,” he instructed. “And take your fucking socks off.”

In less than a minute, Shane was on his back, and Ilya was stretched over him, naked, and kissing him into the mattress.

There were a lot of reasons why it would be messed up if the world could see them right now, but *if* the world could see them right now, they'd have to get it, right? They'd have to see that what he and Shane had together was real and *good* and unstoppable. He knew it would be a shock to the hockey world when they finally held their planned press conference. They would only be announcing that they had started a charity together and that they were friends, but even those basic facts were going to blow some minds.

He could kiss Shane at that press conference. Just pull him in and kiss him in front of the cameras and reporters. Then it would be done.

Ilya grabbed the lube from the nightstand drawer. He sat up, straddling Shane's thighs, and drizzled the lube into his palm and over his fingers.

*Ilya Rozanov and his boyfriend, Shane Hollander*.

Ilya liked the sound of it. The idea of hockey commentators saying those words.

*Ilya Rozanov and his* husband*, Shane Hollander.*

Oooh. Better.

*Hollander passes the puck to his sexy husband, Ilya Rozanov…*

Okay. Maybe Ilya had gone a little heavy on the wine himself tonight.

Ilya took his time working Shane open, savoring every gasp and moan his gorgeous boyfriend gave him. Shane opened for him beautifully, welcoming Ilya's fingers inside. Ilya was always overwhelmed by how easily Shane gave himself to him; how much he trusted Ilya to give him exactly what he needed. Even when they had ostensibly been enemies, Shane had trusted Ilya not to hurt him.

Ilya had never been brave enough to give himself to someone in this way. Maybe that wasn't the right way of thinking about it, but when Ilya watched Shane take his fingers, or his cock, he couldn't help but marvel at his courage. As much as he'd heard the endless locker room insults about taking it in the ass, Ilya knew there was nothing weak about what Shane was doing right now.

"Please. Ilya." Shane's voice was stretched thin. Deciding that he had tortured Shane for long enough, Ilya reached again for the nightstand drawer.

Shane stopped him with a hand on his wrist. “Not tonight.”

Ilya’s breath caught. They had gone without condoms a few times over the past year, but Shane was weird about mess, and usually preferred using protection.

“Are you sure?” Ilya asked.

Shane’s certainty was clear in his eyes, the same way it had been when he’d told Hayden that, yes, he did love Ilya so much. “I’m sure.”

Well, Ilya certainly wasn’t going to argue. He took his hand away from the drawer and placed it on Shane’s cheek. Shane gave him a heartbreakingly adorable grin, and then Ilya kissed the hell out of him.

Entering Shane felt perfect. It always felt perfect, but doing it like this, with nothing between them, was exhilarating. Ilya had never had sex without protection before Shane, and the thrill of it nearly did Ilya in immediately every time they tried it.

Shane’s face went slack and euphoric. “God, that’s so fucking good,” he murmured. He spread his legs wider, drew his knees in closer, begging Ilya with his body language to bury himself deeper. Ilya gripped Shane’s thighs, pushing them back astonishingly far so he could slide in as deep as possible.

Jesus. Ilya needed to buy a thank-you gift for Shane’s yoga instructor.

“Good?” Ilya asked, checking in.

“Amazing,” Shane confirmed.

Ilya smiled. He still fondly remembered the first time Shane had sucked him—had sucked *anyone*—back when they’d been nineteen and Shane had been terrified of his own desires. He’d been so unsure of what to do, but so determined to do it well.

The truth was that Ilya had probably been as terrified as Shane, back then. He’d just been better at hiding it.

The first time Ilya had fucked Shane had been a few months after that, and Ilya had been overly concerned with making it seem like it hadn’t been a big deal. Like being inside Shane hadn’t been a revelation. He’d left the hotel room as soon as possible after, afraid of what he may have said or done if he’d stayed even a minute longer.

He could say or do whatever he wanted now. There was no need to hide his heart now.

“I love this, Shane. I love you so much. You’re beautiful. Perfect.” He turned his head and kissed Shane’s ankle. “Perfect,” he repeated.

“I love you. Love you inside me. Fuck, it’s so good. Always so good, Ilya. Want you to come in me.”

Ilya grunted in response and sped up his thrusts, wanting to give Shane what he needed. Wanting to fill him up. Shane was stroking himself, which Ilya always enjoyed watching. His strong fingers flew over his cock as his back arched off the bed. Christ, he was spectacular.

He cried out as his release showered over his chest, his ass spasming around Ilya’s cock. “Gonna come,” Ilya warned, because holy fuck.

“Yeah,” Shane rasped. “Give it to me. Come on.”

Two more thrusts and Ilya was emptying himself into Shane. He tried to keep his gaze locked with Shane’s as pleasure ripped through him, making it impossible to speak. When his orgasm finally subsided, he pulled Shane up and kissed him, holding him close.

“Fuck,” Shane said breathlessly. “We’re really good at that.”

“The best,” Ilya agreed.

Later, after they had cleaned themselves up and were snuggled together under the blankets, Shane said, “So. Three weeks?”

“Three weeks.” Three weeks until their teams would meet for a Saturday night game. They had decided that they would hold their press conference the following morning.

A heavy silence stretched between them. How much would change for them? How much harder would it be to keep their true relationship a secret? Would it be easier to hide in plain sight as friends? Friends who spent their summers together? Who visited each other during the season, even? Who started a charity together?

Ilya supposed it didn’t matter. They were doing it, and they would deal with the consequences when they happened.

“I’m ready,” Shane said. His voice was clear and steady.

“Yes,” Ilya said softly. “Me too.”